

SKETCH OF THE

Life of Rev. John Wesley, M.A.

By Rev. Hugh Johnston, D.D.

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BY REV. HUGH JOHNSTON, D.D.

JOHN WESLEY, the distinguished father and founder of Methodism, was born at Epworth, England, June 17th, 1703. His father, Rev. Samuel Wesley, was a clergyman of great learning and piety ; and his mother, Susannah Wesley, the daughter of Dr. Samuel Annesley, "the St. Paul of the Nonconformists," was a woman of remarkable gifts, wisdom and virtue. Of her nineteen children, ten lived to be educated, and this duty fell mainly upon her.

The first noted event in the boy-life of John Wesley was his escape from the burning Rectory. "Come, neighbors," cried the father, as the boy was rescued, "let us kneel down. Let us give thanks to God ; He has given me all my children. Let the house go. I am rich enough." From that moment the devoted mother, while careful in the training of all her children, gave especial attention to "little Jack," believing that God had some great work for him to do.

In the twelfth year of his age he was sent to the Charterhouse School, London. It was during his residence at this famous school that the strange noises were heard at the Epworth Rectory. Young Wesley believed with his parents that these noises were supernatural, and they deepened his convictions of the existence of an unseen world, and thus exercised an important influence over his future life.

When seventeen years of age he entered Christ Church College, Oxford, and in due course took his degree of Bachelor of Arts. A writer in the *Westminster Magazine* describes him at this time as a "sensible and acute collegian, a young fellow of the finest classical tastes and of the most liberal and manly sentiments. His perfect knowledge of the classics gave a smooth polish to his wit and an air of superior elegance to all his compositions." But his life was without a religious aim, and he had no experience of vital piety. Now comes a turning-point in his history.

His father was pressing him to enter into holy orders, and he began the reading of the most spiritual and heart-searching books of devotion, like "Thomas a Kempis' Imitation of Christ," and Bishop Taylor's "Holy Living and Dying." The reading of these works, along with the Bible, gave him an earnest desire after an assurance of salvation, and from this time forward it became his single aim to serve God and his fellow-men.

On Sunday, September 19th, 1725, he was ordained a Deacon; 1726, elected Fellow of Lincoln College; made Master of Arts in 1727, and ordained Priest in 1728. His first sermon was preached at South Leigh, and he frequently assisted his father at Epworth. His home, however, was at Oxford, where he was acknowledged to be a man of talent, learning, and great skill in logic.

About this time he, with his brother Charles, and several other young gentlemen, among them Whitfield, agreed to spend a few evenings together every week reading the Greek Testament. They also began to labor for the good of others, visiting the prisoners in the jail, caring for the sick and poor, and teaching the ignorant, neglected children of the town. They were called "The Holy Club," and then nicknamed "Methodists," because they lived by rule, or method.

These Oxford Methodists were exposed to much ridicule and scorn, but the Rector of Epworth wrote to his sons: "I hear John has the honor to be called 'The Father of the Holy Club.' If it is so, I must be the grandfather of it, and I need not say that I had rather any of my sons should be so honored than have the title of His Holiness the Pope."

In the spring of 1735 his father died, and the old homestead passed into other hands. John had been pressed to secure the living, but had at first declined, thinking that he could do more good at Oxford. But his objections were overcome, and he made application to become his father's successor, though without success. Shortly after this missionaries were wanted for Georgia, and Wesley was asked to go. Before consenting he consulted his widowed mother, who replied, "Had I twenty sons, I should rejoice if they were all so employed, even though I should never see them again."

On shipboard were a company of Moravians, whose simple piety touched Wesley's heart. Arriving at Savannah, he consulted the Moravian elder, Spangenburg, concerning his new

sphere of labor, when he was surprised with the remark, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Do you know Jesus Christ?" "I know that He is the Saviour of the world," answered Wesley. "True, but do you know that He has saved you?" "I hope that He has died to save me." Spangenburg added, "Do you know yourself?" "I do," said Wesley, with some misgivings.

The Indians were found to be inaccessible, and he began work among the colonists. He labored in Georgia for two years, when he was compelled to return to England, having suffered much, acquired three European languages, preached to the scattered settlers, and taken steps to give the Gospel to the Negroes and the Indians. As he was nearing his native shores in January, 1737, Wesley wrote: "I went to America to convert Indians, but oh, who shall convert me!"

During his absence, Whitfield had become a flaming evangelist, and having moved all London and Bristol, had just set sail for Georgia. Wesley was yet to receive the new light and the needed impulse. He met Peter Bohler, and was amazed to hear of the holiness and happiness which sprang from living faith. Wesley studied the New Testament more earnestly, and began extemporaneous prayer. An instantaneous change of heart was what staggered him most.

Charles was the first to find peace and salvation, and the new-found joy awoke his lyric soul. "I thought myself in a choir of angels," he writes. This was May 21st, 1738. Three days after, John was at the Society meeting at Aldersgate Street, where a person read Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, in which the great Reformer teaches that faith alone justifies. While this Preface was being read, the Holy Ghost flashed the light into his mind and heart, and he was "born of God." He writes, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. And I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart."

Methodism was born on that night, when John Wesley, at thirty-five years of age, had a clear apprehension of justification by faith in Christ, regeneration by the power of the Holy Ghost, and received the witness that he was a child of God.

Wesley was so indebted to the Moravians, that he was led to visit one of their settlements in Germany, Herrnhuth, where he spent two weeks, delighted and profited by all that he saw and heard there. Returning to London, he began holding services daily. The churches were soon closed against him and his brother, but they labored among the Moravians and in the prisons and houses of the poor.

Now opens a marked feature of the revival movement. Whitfield had returned from America, and while preaching in a London church, a thousand stood outside to hear, and the thought came to him, "Why not speak as Christ did in the open air." He went to Bristol, and soon not only the churches but the prisons were shut against him. Then he dared to be so unpopular as to speak in the open air to about two hundred colliers in Kingswood Grove. At the second service there were two thousand people to hear him. Soon he was preaching to tens of thousands, who were so moved under the Gospel, that the tears made white gutters down their coal-stained faces. Next he ventured upon a large bowling green in the heart of Bristol, and preached to enormous gatherings. He needed help, and sent for Wesley to take his work while he tried the same experiment elsewhere. Charles objected; Wesley hesitated, but at length ventured to follow his friend's example, and so became the greatest out-door preacher that ever lived. He says, "I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, having been all my life, till very lately, so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."

Converts multiplied. The Bristol societies were now many, and a building was necessary. On Saturday, May 12th, 1739, the corner-stone of the first Methodist chapel in the world was laid by Wesley. He had no design of being personally engaged in the expense of the work, and appointed eleven trustees, who were to take the financial responsibility. But Whitfield and others wrote him that they could not help him to build this house unless he held it in his own name. It was needful at first that all responsibility should centre in him; and thus began that system of ownership by which he became the sole proprietor of all his church property. When near his death, by a Deed of Declaration, he transferred all his interest in these chapels to his legal Conference. Decisions in the Court of Chancery made under this

document have given security to the property and stability to the whole economy of Wesleyan Methodism, down to the present hour.

In November of the same year "The Foundery" was fitted up as a chapel, opened for service, and became the head-quarters of Methodism in London. There had been disputes in the Fetter Lane Society, and Wesley was getting out of sympathy with the Moravians. Misunderstandings and offences had crept in. They had become quietists, and were discarding the Christian ministry and the ordinances of the Church. Many repaired to Wesley, who took their names, and met them every Thursday evening for spiritual advice and prayer. Thus the Methodist Society was instituted.

July 23rd, 1740, marks the separation of Wesleyanism from Moravianism, when a seceding society numbering about twenty-five men and fifty women, met for the first time at the Foundery instead of at Fetter Lane. This separation of incipient Methodism from Moravianism enabled the religious movement to adapt itself to its new conditions. Southey says that Methodism was now like a ship upon unknown seas, and that Wesley did not know to what his plans were tending. The great evangelist's one purpose was the spiritual elevation of the people, and as he went along in his work he simply used the best means toward this great end. Reluctantly he began to preach in the open air, but when the churches were closed against him, what else could be done? And so at Kingswood, at Blackheath,* on Kennington Common, and in Moorefield, he preached to such multitudes as could not be gathered in places of worship; thus reaching the neglected masses and pouring his burning convictions upon an atheistic, blasphemous and profligate age, he "awoke to life a stagnant church," and raised a corrupt nation to morality and virtue.

When converted men and women by thousands sought his care and guidance, what could he do but provide houses for their meetings and rules for their associations? Hence the class-meetings, which have had so large a place in Methodist history. Societies were begun in 1739, but it was not till February, 1742, that they were divided into classes. A heavy obligation rested upon the Bristol chapel. The principal members of the Society met together to consult how they should pay the debt. Captain Fry stood up and said, "Let every member give a penny a week, and it will easily be done." "But many are too poor."

"Then," said the Captain, "put eleven of the poorest with me. I will see them weekly. If they can give nothing, I will give for them. Each of you do the same." "This is the very thing we have wanted so long," said Mr. Wesley. He called together these weekly collectors of money, and desired each to make particular inquiry into the behaviour of the members whom they visited. Within six weeks after this, Wesley introduced the same plan in London. At first, the Leaders visited each member at his own house; but this was found to be inconvenient, and before long it was agreed that each Leader should meet his apportioned members all together, once a week, at a time and place most convenient for the whole. The Leader began and ended each meeting with singing and prayer, and spent about an hour in religious conversation. "This," says Mr. Wesley, "was the origin of our classes, for which I can never sufficiently praise God."

So with *lay preaching*, another innovation of great importance. He never planned for it. He had permitted Cennick and Humphreys to pray with and exhort the Societies, but while Wesley was absent from London, Thomas Maxwell, who had been left in charge of the Foundry Society, began to preach, his sermons being accompanied with amazing power. Wesley hearing of the irregularity, hurried back to London to put a padlock on his lips. In the parsonage his mother met him. "So Thomas Maxwell has turned preacher, I hear," said Wesley. His mother answered, "John, take care what you do with respect to that young man; for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are. Examine what have been the fruits of his preaching, and hear him yourself." Wesley heard him, and could only say, "It is the Lord." From that hour lay preaching became an essential factor of Methodism, and Thomas Maxwell was the first of that long procession of local preachers whose tread has shaken the globe.

Wesley's itinerating labors now commenced in earnest. Whitfield had become strongly Calvinistic, and David and Jonathan were divided, each pursuing his own separate course. There were now two sorts of Methodists, for the division in doctrines led to the organization of Lady Huntingdon's Connexion and to the founding of the Calvinistic Methodists in Wales. As Wesley's Societies increased, helpers arose; so that twenty-three itinerants were now travelling and preaching continually.

John Nelson, a Yorkshire stonemason, was converted in London ; and full of zeal for God, he returned to Yorkshire, and became one of the chief founders of Methodism in that county. His labors were greatly blessed, and many of the greatest profligates, blasphemers, drunkards, and Sabbath-breakers were converted. Wesley visited him at Birstal, and then went on to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, at that time a degraded mining town. He was surprised and shocked at the abounding wickedness. Drunkenness and swearing seemed general, and even the mouths of little children were full of curses. Here he preached to thousands. A great reformation followed, a large Society was soon formed, and a chapel and orphanage built, called, "The Orphan House."

On his way back from the north of England he visited, among other places, Epworth, and not being permitted to preach in the church, he stood upon his father's tombstone, and daily, for a week, preached to his old Lincolnshire parishioners, many of whom found peace with God and "broke out into loud thanksgiving."

Hearing of his mother's illness, he hastened to London to attend her death-bed. The dying saint said to her sons and daughters, while they stood around her, "Children, as soon as I am released sing a psalm of praise to God." She died July 23rd, 1742, and was buried in Bunhill Fields cemetery.

In the year 1743, Methodism became more firmly rooted in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle ; and Societies were formed in Somersetshire, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Leicestershire, Warwickshire, Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire. Additions were also being made from Methodism to the Church in Heaven. Numbers died in the full triumphs of faith, and their dying testimonies became an inspiration to the living. Still persecutions prevailed, and the powers of evil were in active opposition. Newspapers and periodicals maligned and reviled them, and pulpits lampooned and denounced them. Turbulent mobs, headed often by gentlemen and clergymen in their half-heathenish and wholly neglected parishes, assailed their congregations and used personal violence against the preachers and their adherents. They were frequently pelted with brickbats and rotten eggs, cudgelled with sticks and clubs, horns were blown, drums beaten, bells jangled, fiddles played, and ballads sung. William Seward had fallen, from the brutal blow of a villain, Methodism's proto-martyr. Thomas Beard, from

wounds received, was sent to the Newcastle hospital; and praising God to the end, went home to receive the martyr's crown. The two Wesleys were often mobbed.

Hearing of the terrible riots in Staffordshire, in 1743, Wesley hastened down to comfort and assist the poor Methodists there. As soon as he entered this wild beasts' den, the mob beset the house and cried, "Bring out the minister; we will have the minister." He was carried from one end of the town to the other. A big burly fellow just behind him struck him several times with an oaken club. Another rushed through the crowd, lifted his arm to strike, but on a sudden let it drop and only stroked Wesley's head, saying, "What soft hair he has!" One man struck him on the breast; and another on the mouth, with such force that the blood gushed out. While the mob roared, he calmly asked, "Are you willing to hear me speak?" Many cried, "No, no!" "Knock out his brains!" "Down with him!" "Kill him at once!" Wesley asked, "What evil have I done? Which of you all have I wronged in word or deed?" Again they cried, "Bring him away; bring him away!" Wesley began to pray; and now a man, who just before was the ringleader, turned and said, "Sir, I will spend my life for you. Follow me and no one shall hurt a hair of your head." Two or three of his companions joined him, and Wesley was carried safely through the infuriated crowd that seemed bent on his murder. The hero writes: "From the beginning to the end I found the same presence of mind, as if I had been sitting in my own study." "What think you of my brother?" asked Charles of the captain of another mob. "Think of him! why, that he is a *mon* of God, and God was on his side when so many of us were not able to kill one *mon*."

Cornwall rivalled the "black country" in its scenes of fiendish violence. But soon this hot-bed of sin became a hot-bed of the new faith.

The work spread in London. A chapel was opened in West Street, Seven Dials, and another at Snowsfield, where the people were exceptionally wicked. "What!" exclaimed a zealous woman, "will Mr. Wesley preach at Snowsfield? Surely not. There is not such another place in London; the people there are not men, but devils." This was just the reason to induce Wesley to go.

He now appointed visitors of the sick and poor; and dividing the metropolis into twenty-three districts, arranged for the regular visitation of the sick, and that the visitors, besides

inquiring into the state of the people's souls, should relieve those who were in want. Thus the poor were cared for in body and soul. No wonder Green, in his "History of England," says: "The noblest result of the religious revival was the steady attempt, which has never ceased from that day to this, to remedy the guilt, the ignorance, the physical suffering, the social degradation of the profligate and the poor."

Disturbances and outbreaks were still common, but these fearful outrages drew the attention of the common people to the new evangelism; and though the clergy and magistrates were often on the side of the rabble, yet religious impressions were deepened, sinners converted by thousands, and the tide of salvation rolled along with increasing power over the land.

Wesley now published the first edition of the "Rules," under the head, "The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingswood and Newcastle-upon-Tyne." Notwithstanding his almost incessant travelling and preaching, he found time to write books, and his publications and compilations were multiplying year by year. He was flooding the land with Christian literature, cheapening and popularizing religious reading. He paid special attention to the singing of his followers, and supplied them with hymns. Both brothers were full of music, but Charles was the poet of the great revival, the hymnist of the world; and during Wesley's life there were published not less than six thousand six hundred hymns from the pen of Charles Wesley alone.

On the 25th June, 1744, the first Methodist Conference was held at the Foundery, London. There were present six clergymen and four lay preachers. The Conference lasted six days, and the three points discussed were: (1) What to teach, (2) How to teach, and (3) How to regulate doctrine, discipline, and practice. They defined with great precision the doctrines of Repentance, Faith, Justification, Sanctification, and the Witness of the Spirit. These are still the "five points" of Methodism. They decided to observe the canons of the Church, and expressed the belief that "the Methodists would either be thrust out or would leaven the whole Church." Both these events took place.

In the August of this year Wesley preached for the last time before the University at Oxford. His lay preachers had now become numerous, and they were laboring in different parts of the kingdom. A great reformation had come over all England. The morals of the

whole population had been purified. The lowest masses of the cities, collieries, and rural districts had felt the ploughshare of the Gospel.

The work had spread to Ireland. In 1747 Wesley made his first visit to Dublin. He made frequent visits after this to the Isle of Saints, and fully six of his toilsome years were spent in labors there. In Ireland some of the greatest victories of Methodism were won.

In 1751 he visited Scotland, and was pleased with the manners of the people. They would not even riot and persecute him. He said, "They know everything and feel nothing." He made frequent Gospel raids across the Tweed.

In the February of this year Wesley, at the age of forty-eight, was married to Mrs. Vazeille, a widow who became a perverse and peevish spouse, and whose violent temper and insane behaviour rank her with Xantippe and the wife of Job. His married life was absolutely miserable, yet it did not affect his spirits or diminish his amazing energy and herculean labors.

In 1770 there were fifty Methodist circuits, of which one was America, 120 itinerant preachers, and 29,406 members.

Now follow six years of polemical strife—the Antinomian or Calvinian controversy. Wesley at this Conference had repeated the query of 1744, "Have we not leaned too much toward Calvinism?" The battle over this answer raged hard and long, and in it many distinguished divines took part. To Wesley's aid came Rev. John Fletcher, the saintly Vicar of Madeley, who was to the great Reformer what Melancthon was to Luther, and whose unanswerable checks to Antinomianism have influenced Methodism doctrinally more, perhaps, than even Wesley's own writings, and have tinged and modified the theological thought of the Protestant world.

Wesley had now reached his "three score years and ten." The most persecuted of men had become the best known, the most felt and most honored man in England. Around him were gathered men of genius and piety, who shared his labors, called him father, and loved him with an unfaltering tenderness. He still rides on horseback, "paying more tolls than any other Englishman." At Gwinnepp his audience was estimated at 32,000, and he was heard at the outskirts, perhaps the first time that a man of seventy had been heard by 30,000 persons at once. In 1775 he marvellously recovered from a dangerous illness. In November, 1778, he

dedicated the City Road Chapel, the venerable cathedral of Methodism, within whose walls are erected tablets to his memory, and in whose graveyard rest his ashes with the dust of five thousand of his heroes.

In 1779 arose "The Naval and Military Bible Society," the first Bible Society founded in Great Britain or the world; and three years after was formed the first Religious Tract Society ever organized. Methodism had now gone to Newfoundland, the West Indies, and the American continent; for his motto, "The world is my parish," was the measure of the wideness of his faith and charity.

In 1780 he appointed 171 preachers to sixty-four circuits, with 43,870 members. As he entered his seventy-eighth year, the venerable evangelist writes, "By the blessing of God, I am just the same as when I entered the twenty-eighth;" and on his eightieth birthday he says, "My time is not yet labor and sorrow."

In March, 1784, he set out on a seven months' journey through England, Scotland and Wales. This year he executed his famous "Deed of Declaration." He also ordained preachers for America, and appointed Dr. Coke, the great organizer of Christian Missions, and Asbury, the Apostle of America, joint Superintendents for the work there. Wesley was the venerable father of 15,000 members in America, who were in no sense members of the Church of England. They were without the sacraments and with no one to administer them, and he could not refuse to give them an independent Church government.

Wesley refused separation from the Church in England, and although the Conferences of 1786 and 1787 clamored for it, yet he was unwilling to alter the relation of his people to the Established Church. It was only the intolerance of the clergy that forced him to take such steps as made separation the necessary result of his work. Thus they became a "separated" people.

In 1788 Charles Wesley died. Still the indomitable old man toils on. On his eighty-sixth birthday, he writes, "Now I find I grow old." But he still itinerates, though not able to preach "above twice a day." No houses are large enough to contain his congregations, and wherever he goes the streets are lined with people to get a sight of his white locks. No mobs or persecutions now, but tears and farewell blessings, as at each place he takes a solemn leave.

In January, 1790, he writes : " I am now an old man, but, blessed be God, I do not slack my labors. I can preach and write still."

At Bristol he held his last Conference, and then spent three weeks in Wales. His last sermon was preached February 23rd, 1791, the last of 42,400—an average of fifteen sermons a week since 1738. The day following he wrote his last letter, which was addressed to Wilberforce, to hearten him in his efforts for the abolition of slavery. On the 25th he was unable to do work, and his weakness increased. The closing scene is near. His last hours were spent in words to friends and in snatches of song and prayer. The day before his death, summoning all his strength, he exclaimed in joyful triumph, " The best of all is, God is with us." During the night he repeated again and again the words, " I'll praise—I'll praise." On the morning of March 2, 1791, about ten o'clock, he softly whispered, " Farewell !" and passed through the shining gates into the celestial city.

Thus died, in the eighty-eighth year of his age and in the sixty-fifth year of his ministry, the most distinguished revivalist God ever gave to the Church. His labors were unexampled. He had travelled a quarter of a million of miles, mostly on horseback, and, besides preaching two and three times daily, had used his pen incessantly, publishing fourteen closely printed volumes of original prose works, fifty-two volumes in poetry, and 119 volumes of commentaries, abridgments and compilations.

At his death there were nearly 72,000 members in Great Britain and Ireland, and over 48,000 members in America. To-day the Church which he founded has a membership of nearly six millions, and exerts its influence over thirty millions of people. " One community bears Wesley's name ; the Churches have caught his spirit." His work still goes on in every part of the habitable globe, and his influence has broadened theology, promoted a deep, personal piety, an intelligent and active benevolence, improved the moral and social conditions of mankind and blessed the world.

TORONTO, *July*, 1891

